

〈資 料〉

Suvmalee Karunaratna : Four Short Stories of Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Suvmalee Karunaratna is a journalist, television script writer, radio producer, short story writer and novelist.

She was born on April 15, 1939 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Her early schooling was at Holy Family Convent, Kalutara, and C. M. S. Ladies College, Colombo.

From October 1948 to May 1952 she attended Maret School, Washington, D. C., where her father W. D. Gunaratna O. B. E. was posted on a diplomatic assignment.

After returning to Sri Lanka, she continued her secondary education at C. M. S. Ladies College, 1952–1957.

In 1957 she accompanied her parents to Burma and Thailand, where her father was posted as Sri Lanka's Ambassador from 1957 to 1962.

In 1964 Suvmalee Karunaratna took to creative writing, and a number of her short stories appeared in English language dailies in Sri Lanka.

In 1969 she did free lance journalism for about six months for the Ceylon Observer, The Sun, and Week-End.

In 1972 she joined the English Language Service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and produced feature programs. Among these programs, two were the history of broadcasting in Sri Lanka, and the constitutional evolution of Sri Lanka from a colony to independent status. She also produced programs on national development spotlighting the work of government departments. Some of her programs of topical interest were "Welcome to Sri Lanka" featuring aspects of cultural importance, "Arts Magazine", and "Literary Quarter".

In 1973 Suvimalee Karunaratna's *Bili Pooja*, a collection of short stories, was published by Hansa Publishers, Colombo.

In 1976 she married Dr. Nihal Karunaratna, a general practitioner. She has three step-sons.

About Suvimalee Karunaratna's short stories it has been said that they reveal "the rich and subtly varied patterns" of the daily lives of Sri Lankans. The four short stories that follow reveal some of these patterns.

The story of "The Bourgeoisie" is set in the early 1970s. It points up the cultural gap between the elitist anglicized upper middle class in Sri Lanka and the masses whom Ranjan describes as thwarted by poverty and frustration and society's stifling indifference. Ranjan subscribes to the then popular concept of "social realism" — that the validity of art or literature depends upon its relevance to the problems of the masses. Ranjan takes an extreme, exaggerated stance because unconsciously he is turning his back on his own upper middle class in order to survive among the new Marxist revolutionary youth beginning to make their presence felt in Sri Lanka in the early 1970s.

"The Forest Reserve" is set in the present. The forest reserve in the story is a typical example of a reserve on which poor people encroach because they depend on it for fuel and forest products like fruits and edible animals. The injustice pointed out in "The Forest Reserve" is that the rules against encroachment are followed strictly as far as the poor are concerned but that a powerful film company was able to obtain permission to invade the forest on a scale that would damage it to a great extent.

In "When the Dam Is Built" the time is the early 1980s. The Kotmale Dam was being built to dam the head-waters of the longest river in Sri Lanka, the Mahaveli River. This particular dam was one in a series being built for the generation of hydro electricity as well as for storing water for irrigation purposes. The story describes the impact of the building of the dam on villagers occupying its immediate area. The theme of the story is the inevitability of modernization and the old order giving way to the new.

"The Festival Stall" points to the modern commercialization of the ancient

Esala Festival. To Nandasiri, the main character, the origin and meaning of the festival does not mean anything. He merely uses the festival as an opportunity to make money. The writer does not blame him for doing this because of his poverty.

The Bourgeoisie

Old Mr. Nicholas, the music teacher, walked uncertainly up the steps leading to the hall. An exclusive girls' school in the city was presenting a public benefit show in aid of their new school building. Not that old Mr. Nicholas cared much about the school or its building fund but a good many of his pupils and 'grands pupils', as he fondly called them, were performing that evening and one proud Mama had pressed a ticket on him.

So that was how he found himself in the midst of a milling crowd of preening ladies, dressed in their silk finery, looking smug as they sailed into the auditorium with their spouses, a few of whom were diehards of the old colonial days.¹⁾ Their Oxford accents, or what passed for it, could be heard booming greetings to one another across the marble floor of the foyer.

"Hello Desmond! How are you?" Old Mr. Nicholas felt a cheery slap on his shoulder which shook his thin frail frame and caused him to totter. When he turned around he recognized his old friend 'Lord Haw Haw',²⁾ so called, of course, by his less anglicized colleagues.

"Well, Well, Well! Isn't this a pleasant surprise! Come to see your daughter in the show, eh?" Old Mr. Nicholas asked.

"My grand daughter" Lord Haw Haw corrected him, smiling proudly. "And this is my son, Ranjan. He's just back from Oxford, you know."

Mr. Nicholas saw the tall, gaunt, sombre looking youth standing by his father. The young man's fiercely active eyes seemed trapped in his bearded face. Something about his stance and expression reminded Mr. Nicholas of a scowling giraffe.

"Glad to meet you" Mr. Nicholas shook his hand. "The last time I saw you, I remember you were knee high to a grass hopper."

"My goodness, the bell's ringing, Mummy!" Lord Haw Haw shouted to his wife who was still at the entrance talking to friends and with a great deal of huffing and puffing he herded his wife, son and daughter into the hall.

The Programme began with a scene from '*Pride and Prejudice*' a scene between Elizabeth and Darcy.³⁾ It was a commendable performance and at the end of it, the youthful actresses were given an ovation. Only Lord Haw Haw's son sat looking impassive. No one could say what he was thinking.

"There's that cranky son of Lord Haw Haw" old Mr. Nicholas heard a Mamma seated next to him whisper to another.

"What's he doing, arh?"

"God knows, child. I don't think he is doing anything, really. It seems he writes all kinds of articles for foreign magazines and things."

"With all his expensive education abroad, he should have studied something practical like tax law" the other commented. "The old man has nothing now, you know. All his lands have been nationalized. Land reform you know.⁴⁾ Even his business is not doing well, I hear."

Next on the programme was a Bharatha Natyam performance.⁵⁾ The dancer was obviously talented but unfortunately not everyone in the audience was able to appreciate the 'alien' music.⁶⁾ Old Mr. Nicholas looked on dully as the girl went through her intricate foot work and clear cut hand and neck movements. No doubt she did this with admirable precision and engaging verve but the *mudras*⁷⁾ were quite incomprehensible to Mr. Nicholas, seeming even crude, and after some time he allowed himself to be diverted by the energetic Tabla⁸⁾ player's excessive head noddings.

"That was nice, wasn't it Daddy?" Lord Haw Haw's wife remarked to

her husband after the item was over. "Only how long these 'oriental' things take-and its so stuffy and hot in here !" she began to fan herself vigorously, the energy expended in the effort causing her to perspire even more.

Daddy yawned. He had been nearly dozing off.

"Lakshmi is in the next item" his daughter announced excitedly. Lord Haw Haw sat up with alacrity. Soon a host of fairies descended on the stage. They pranced about on the points of their toes, holding their frilly ballet skirts, their curls bobbing up and down. The ballet teacher watched them tensely through a side curtain while a gnome of an old lady began to bang out a springy galumphing rhythm on the piano, the beat of which seemed more suited to cavorting elephants. It was the best item of all, Daddy declared loudly, after the fairies had done their item, courtseyed and flown away.

Only Lord Haw Haw's son remained impassive.

"Didn't you think Lakshmi was good in that, Ranjan?" his sister asked him.

Ranjan uncrossed his legs and re-crossed them slowly and deliberately while he gave the question of his niece's performance some dispassionate thought.

"Hm. Yes," He said tonelessly after a long pause. His sister was hurt by his lack of enthusiasm.

After the interval there was a rather clever theatrical farce, partly in the form of a Demon Ritual.⁹⁾ It was on the theme of 'keeping the city clean' — a demon being summoned to clean up the city and purge society of its false values as well. Although old Mr. Nicholas could not quite understand all the demon's witty asides, wise cracks and social comment — all of which were made in Sinhala — he could see there was something clever and exciting in this piece of theatre which drew not only from the indigenous theatre tradition of the land but the modern 'theatre of

the absurd' also.

"My dear, what on earth are they saying?" an irritated Mama, whose enjoyment of the play was hampered by an imperfect understanding of her native tongue, wanted to know. "What grotesque attitudes! How much more graceful and refined the ballet was!"

"I have no idea what it's all about" replied the other. "By the way, Marjie, how are your French Classes getting on?"¹⁰⁾

"Not bad. I can't, of course, speak it yet but I am on the second book now."

"I've started going for German Classes. I find it easier than French, you know."

The Variety Entertainment Show ended with a piano recital. The ten year old performer was a star pupil of old Mr. Nicholas and he felt as proud of her as her parents. She played Beethoven's Fur Elze and she played it poignantly but not mushily. There was an ariel delicateness of touch and a surprising detachment in the clear, haunting melody. The transitions were effected with exquisite smoothness. In one particular passage, the melody skidded away dizzily, seemingly carried away in a delirious whimsical flight, like a bee gone crazy with intoxication after sucking its fill at a delicious flower, to return only too soon, sober, very much in command of itself, to drink deep and soulfully of life again-its beauty and pathos.

The silence that greeted the end of the piece was shattered by one solitary voice shouting "Bravo!" and then a deafening applause followed. The small elfin figure on the piano stool looked back at the audience as if looking at something that did not quite concern her and then slipped away quietly. Old Mr. Nicholas got up exultingly.

Later, as he reached the foyer with the chattering, slowly moving tide of people, he saw Lord Haw Haw's son standing by the entrance looking over the heads of everyone, waiting, no doubt, for his gregarious parents.

To Mr. Nicholas, the tall youth really resembled a lonely, somewhat bizarre giraffe.

"You enjoy the evening's entertainment?" Mr. Nicholas patted Ranjan affectionately on the shoulder as he paused by the steps.

Ranjan merely smirked superciliously.

"Quite good, wasn't it?" Mr. Nicholas repeated.

"Not my cup of tea" Ranjan shrugged "Too bourgeois for my liking."

Old Mr. Nicholas nearly fell down the steps. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh well, what else can you expect from an environment like this!" The contempt in Ranjan's tone was unmistakeable.

"I don't quite understand you" Mr. Nicholas hesitated, "What is wrong with this environment?"

"You can't expect something really genuine and indigenous to spring from a background like this, surely." Ranjan indicated the spacious auditorium and the school premises with a disdainful wave of his hand. "Do you really think true art can emerge from this?"

"I don't know" Mr. Nicholas mused, "What about that little pianist? Didn't you think she had talent?"

"Talent, maybe, but I wouldn't call all that we saw and heard this evening, true art, worthwhile or valid."

"What would you call it then?"

"Oh, a hotch potch of feeble noises... from the last pathetic bastion of a pampered alienated, decadent bourgeoisie, and they can only produce third rate stuff like this!"

"Aren't you being unfair?" Mr. Nicholas protested "It was not all that bad for a school performance. And what about that farcical demon ritual? That was rather clever, didn't you think?"

"How can you expect anything really genuine and indigenous to spring from a background like this?" Ranjan repeated "If you want to find true

art you've got to look for it among the masses. What comes out from the very veins and fibres of the proletariat is what is really worth considering as art, you know. That which has true relevance to life. But the pity of it all is that the real talent of the land has no chance. It lies neglected, without opportunities for development or to express itself-thwarted by poverty and frustration and society's stifling indifference."

"I suppose there is some truth in what you are saying" Mr. Nicholas pondered "But I don't agree with you entirely."

"Don't you see? The real talented artists of the land have no chance. They are squashed, made pulp of and bled dry. They are the victims of a pernicious system that still persists in our society, left over by successive colonial regimes and now sustained by a neo-colonialist society." Ranjan began to speak heatedly as though he were on a platform addressing an audience. "After all the social upheavals that have taken place during recent times, is this what we have to show for culture? How relevant was all that nonsense to the mainstream of our national life?"

"It was only a school performance." Mr. Nicholas reminded him.

"Why, what we saw this evening was so blatantly and ludicrously unrelated to the existence of the real people of this country and their problems that-that it was unbelievable!" Ranjan's intensity embarrassed and somewhat alarmed Mr. Nicholas. After some time he stopped listening and absently fingered his chin, wondering how much Ranjan really knew about the suffering artists of the proletariat, whom he was championing so violently.

"My dear fellow..." Mr. Nicholas said finally laying a compassionate and fatherly hand on Ranjan's shoulder. "I think it's a question of survival for all of us now, not only your down trodden artists, isn't it? That really is the problem — survival — isn't it?" He patted Ranjan on the shoulder and began to descend the steps. At that moment, Ranjan's look of bewilderment

made him appear more than ever like a lonely giraffe. Mr. Nicholas felt sorry to leave Ranjan like that, alone on top of the steps, contemplating his survival among the bourgeoisie.

The Forest Reserve

Not very long ago, the forest near their cottage had been declared a Reserve. Heen Banda, with his son, Sunil, had watched silently the forest officers strutting about in their boots putting up the fence posts and the barbed wire right round the periphery of the forest. They had put up also the yellow board at the entrance bearing the legend "Forest Reserve and Sanctuary".

"That means they don't want us to go inside and cut wood after this, or sell the wood to timber merchants in the town" Sunil's father said with annoyance. He picked his teeth with a twig, squatting on a rock outside their cottage which hugged the side of the hill near the Sanctuary. "From where do they expect us to get firewood?"

"We'll have to go elsewhere-to some other forest" Sunil said.

Heen Banda had visions of himself trudging across town to other distant hills and scouring the area for firewood.

"Rubbish! Why go running all over the countryside when we have enough firewood right here at our doorstep?"

"There is that forest guard, Sumanapala, at the entrance gate" Sunil's mother called out to them in her high, shrill voice. She had overheard their conversation and had come to the door. "It won't be easy to cut and carry away firewood from the forest without him or other guards noticing."

"Just keep quiet!" Sunil's father growled "I know this forest in and out. You think on or two guards can keep watch over the whole boundary?"

However, cutting and collecting firewood and removing it from the

Reserve did not prove as easy as Heen Banda had imagined. He found the forest guards very vigilant and not one bit co-operative.

"Those forest guards — they think they are mighty big shots" he complained to his wife one evening as he took his usual swig of arrack.¹¹⁾

"Huh ! We only know who they are ! Never-do-well loafers from God knows where, trying to throw their weight around ! They better not cross my path too often !"

"I have only two pieces of fire wood left" Sunil's mother remarked. "I suppose I'll have to start scrambling up other hill sides tomorrow morning"

"I will get the wood for you, don't worry." Heen Banda promised gruffly, draining his bottle of arrack.

Early next morning, Heen Banda had shaken Sunil by the shoulder and woken him. Sunil sat up with alacrity.

"Hurry up ! We're going inside the forest" his father said.

It was still dark when they stumbled out of their cottage. Sunil could see a pale luminosity straining through the dark embryo of the sky. In the chilly air, he trembled with cold and excitement.

He followed his father up the hill behind their cottage towards the Forest Reserve. When they came to the fence, Heen Banda pressed down the lowest strand of barbed wire with his axe and held it to the ground firmly, keeping the weight of his foot on the axe blade. He pulled up the next strand as far as he could and told Sunil to pass through the gap. Sunil struggled through clumsily, tearing his shirt in the process.

"There ! What the hell, you devil ! Tore your shirt didn't you?" Heen Banda scolded him. "Now hold this up till I creep through."

His father accomplished the feat with the agility of a civet cat. Sunil had always admired his father's prowess in the jungle. He could set traps for small animals and bring down a bird with unerring aim from his catapult. To compensate for his drinking habit, which washed away most

of his earnings as a carter, he had a knack of always bringing home something for the cooking pot from the forest. It might only be a handful of edible leaves on most days or wild breadfruit or mangoes for a curry but occasionally he brought home the creatures of the undergrowth whose flesh they relished, like iguana, hare or porcupine. Such delicacies went well with the yams Sunil's mother grew in their garden for they couldn't afford to have rice all the time. No matter, it sufficed to sustain them at a bare subsistence level.

Having crept through the fence, they came on to a wide path. Sunil knew the path well. It was the main path that ran through the forest. They walked along the path a few yards and then his father left it and began to climb further up the hill side. Sunil clambered after him, the wet foliage and tall lemon grass brushing against his legs. In the grey light, he could discern two leeches crawling up his feet.

When they reached the summit of the knoll, Heen Banda stopped and began to chop down a few branches from a tree with practised strokes from his axe and then to hack down the tree itself. Sunil wandered off to remove the leeches from his legs and to peer down on the path below to see if he could spy anyone coming along that way.

"Here, help me carry these down" his father called to him presently. "We must drag them away soon. Quick ! Hurry up !"

They dragged away the chopped up tree and its branches down the hill slope and then along the path at a run, his father urging him on still faster for the early morning light was hurriedly dissolving the dawn gloom and steaming through the tall boles of the trees. The sudden shrieks of parrots startled the silence in the damp ravines, echoing through the forest, and the cooing of doves and the sweet contrapuntal exchange of bird song added to the din.

When they came out of the fence, the sky was stained with a clear

pure light. His mother had lit the hearth with a few faggots and had placed the blackened iron kettle on it. She turned and looked through the open doorway at the precious pile they had dragged down into their compound.

"Let it dry there in the sun." Heen Banda told her, coming into the kitchen and placing the axe in its customary corner.

She sprinkled a few tea leaves into a battered tin mug and poured boiling water over it. There was a bottle of sugar on a shelf. She took it down and carefully shook out a few grains on to her palm. "Take your *roti*"¹²⁾ she told Sunil's father. "But there is nothing to have it with. Only the tea."

Heen Banda had lived at the edge of the forest all his life and had learnt how to extract its produce. Sunil knew the forest almost as well as his father; for as long as he could remember, he had been trotting at his father's side in and out of it. But the forest had not become his livelihood as yet. It was still his playground. Often, after school, he would wander through it with his friends, picking berries and mangoes and aiming stones at monkeys to watch them jumping from tree to tree.

There was a hermitage in the forest and yellow robed monks lived in it. Sometimes Sunil ran errands and did odd jobs for them. The old monk taught lessons from the scriptures on Sundays but Sunil and his friends were never regular in their attendance at these classes. On full moon days, many devotees from the town came to meditate at the temple and to listen to sermons.

One full moon day, Sunil had gone to the hermitage when he heard Sumanapala, the forest guard, in conversation with the old monk.

"It's a foreign film company and they are going to make a war film in here" he was telling the monk.

"A war film? what kind of a war film?" the monk asked perplexed.

"You know-with guns and bombs and soldiers marching through the jungle."

"But this is a Forest Reserve" the monk said.

"Its very convenient to them being so close to town and the hotels and everything."

"But this is a Forest Reserve !" the monk repeated.

"It has nothing to do with me, Ven'ble Sir" the forest guard said, "I'm only a 'small' man."

When Sunil told his father about the film company being allowed to go into the forest to film, he was very angry.

"I'll teach those forest guards a thing or two if those film people take out so much as a leaf from the forest. If they so much as break a twig, we'll see what I'll do to that Sumanapala devil !"

"But what can he do ?" Sunil's mother said, "He's only a 'small' man, just like you."

"Then he better show more sympathy for a brother 'small' man like me or he'll know all about it !"

On the following day, when Sunil returned from school, his mother told him that the film company people had been in the forest.

"I heard several vehicles driving one after the other into forest. The noise was like traffic on a main road."

"So ? Are they coming again ?" Sunil asked excitedly, "I wish I could have gone and watched them filming. You think I could get a casual job working for them ?"

His mother hesitated, considering the question. "I don't know. I heard a lot of noise up there-as if hundreds of people were crashing through the forest and sounds like gun shots and explosions. I even saw smoke. I don't know how safe it will be for you to work for them."

Sunil hardly could gulp down his noon day meal of rice and curry. He was in such a tearing hurry to run into the forest.

There were no people or vehicles in the forest when he went inside.

The film company had left after shooting for the day. There was an eerie presence, though. An unusual silence... as if the forest was holding its breath. He looked up at the trees. Even the nesting birds had flown away, leaving the nests empty. Not a parrot could be heard shrieking in the ravines below. Even the boisterous monkeys were nowhere to be seen. There was also a peculiar scent — an unpleasant one — unlike the usual clean air exhaled by the trees and plants. He walked further through the forest and came to a clearing where freshly cut leaves and branches had been strewn over a burnt up patch of undergrowth. He was turning over the leaves with his foot and examining the burnt up patch of ground underneath when he saw Sumanapala, the guard, walking towards him.

“You alone today, boy?” Sumanapala asked him amiably.

“Yes” Sunil replied, surprised to find the usually scowling man in a genial mood.

Sumanapala pulled out a cigarette from a pack and put it inbetween his lips. He returned the pack to his shirt pocket slowly so Sunil could notice the expensive imported brand name. Then he took out a shiny lighter and lit his cigarette. The lighter did not escape Sunil’s notice either.

“Tell your father it’s alright coming in here and taking out a few sticks and branches from the forest now and then” he said, putting away his lighter and speaking with the cigarette wobbling from his lips. “I’m sure we can come to a mutual understanding. After all we don’t have to quarrel over a little thing like this, no?”

Sunil watched him walking away with a slight swagger.

When The Dam Is Built

Their wattle and daub cottage stood in a grove of coconut, arecanut, plantain and jak.¹³⁾ Along the hedge, Mangalika’s father had planted betel

vines, coffee, cardamom and cloves. Their rice fields lay below, terraced up and down the hill slopes.

There was no lack of rain in the valley, though it did not come always on time. The soil was rich for all Mangalika's grandfather's grumblings that the soil was less fertile than it had been when he was a boy. But despite grandfather's grumblings, the sight of the whole valley flaunting its rice fields like a monk's yellow patch-work robe, was really a sight to fill anyone's belly.

"Look at this soil" grandfather complained, squatting in the front compound, prodding the earth with his stick. "No wonder we can't grow things the way we used to." He cast his eyes up to the hills hemming the valley. "It comes from felling those trees up there. When the trees are cut the underground streams dry up. Is it a wonder one has to dig twenty to thirty feet down now to get water? It wasn't so when I was a boy."

"Not only that" Mangalika's father said, "when the trees up there are cut, the land gives way. Didn't you see how the last earth slip split Ukku Banda's field into two and washed it away into the river?"

"There are too many people in this valley now" grandfather grumbled, "more numbers than the land can hold. That's what has ruined the place. Can't keep a thing on the trees for ourselves; not a bunch of plantains or arecaunts can mature in peace but some loafer must come in the night and steal them all."

"Still it doesn't warrant drowning the valley in the dam" father commented acidly.

Podi Malli,¹⁴⁾ Mangalika's youngest brother, looked up from the kite he was making. "Where will we go when the dam is built?" he wanted to know, but no one had the answer to that. This talk of building the dam, which, incidentally, would flood the whole valley, had gone on for so long that everyone had been lulled into a sense of complacency.

"We old people will be dead and gone before that finally happens, thank heavens" was the way grandfather looked at it.

"It will happen sooner than you think" father said.

"Why are they going to dam the river here, sister?" Podi Malli asked. Mangalika didn't know, but since everyone looked to her for the answer, she assumed an air of knowledge.

"Because they've got to store the water up here — volumes and volumes of it to send down into the plains in the dry zone when there is no water for the crops there."

"Yes, but why must our valley be sacrificed?" Nonay, a school friend of Mangalika's asked, looking belligerently at Mangalika as if she were the culprit responsible for the dam.

"Yes, that is quite so. Why should our valley be sacrificed?" Nonay's father echoed.

"That is the price we have to pay for progress" Mangalika said glibly. "Thousands are going to be given land in the dry zone plains to settle down there to make it bloom again as it did two thousand years ago. In the past it was done with gigantic reservoirs and irrigation channels. Today we can do it better with modern technology to aid us. That is progress."

"Progress!" Nonay's father nearly shouted "All these fields going under water is progress? Then you better get land in the dry zone and go there and progress. I am too old now to leave this place."

"In the old days people used to make human sacrifices to the river for prosperity. Now it looks as if our whole valley is going to be sacrificed for the good of the whole country" grandfather observed.

"Appuhamy uncle says the iron foundries in our village are more than two thousand years old" Podi Malli said "It seems it was Appuhamy uncle's ancestors who made weapons for King Dutugemunu's army"¹⁵⁾.

"Otherwise!" Nonay's father exclaimed hotly, "A few years ago

don't you remember how some newspaper men came and took photographs of our iron foundries and put it all in the papers?"

"But what was the good of all that drum beating? Now progress is going to drown it all" Nonay said bitterly.

"Doesn't matter all this history and everything drowning if it is really for the good of the whole country" Mangalika said. Self sacrifice and martyrdom appealed to her.

"This valley is our home" Nonay's father said stubbornly.

"Whether you like it or not the dam is going to be built" grandfather drawled. "Where are you getting your new land, Banday?"

"We have asked for land close to this area" Nonay's father replied. "But the getting is another matter, as you know. And you, uncle?"

Grandfather looked at Mangalika's father who shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I haven't decided yet" He said glumly, picking his teeth with a splinter and watching Loku Malli,¹⁶⁾ another of Mangalika's brothers, shying up a tall slender arecanut tree. His feet fettered by an anklet of leafy rope, Loku Malli gripped the tree tight and hugging it also with his two bony arms, he pushed himself up as nimbly as a monkey. The tree swayed in the wind. They watched as the small form crouched under the crown of branches, high over the fields. He pulled out the knife at his waist and with it, lashed smartly at the bunch of arecanuts. Then, returning the knife to his waist and holding the tree with one spidery arm, he pulled at the bunch with the other and drawing it out in one graceful arc, threw it down. Grandfather walked up to the fallen bunch and picked it up.

"Over there" he pointed to the opposite side of the garden as Loku Malli shied down the tree. "I am sure the arecanuts on those trees are mature."

The trees on that side seemed taller by far than the others. A thrill ran up Managalika's spine as her brother fairly leapt on to one of them like

a young warrior galloping off to war on a charger. She almost envied his non-chalance, grappling with the tree as it were life itself.

Only Mangalika and her two younger brothers lived with their parents in the valley to help cultivate their fields. Both Mangalika's elder brothers had gone to nearby towns to settle down, one to work in a motor repair shop and another to work in a textile factory. They were doing well but never seemed to have enough money to buy the things they wanted.

In fact, their wants seemed always to be increasing. Whenever they came home they were forever discussing and comparing with each other the prices of their wrist watches, radios, torches,¹⁷⁾ bicycles and other recent acquisitions and complaining of their inability to buy the better makes or other goods beyond their reach. Mangalika's parents would look on with pride at their knowledgeable men-of-the-world sons but grandfather was unimpressed.

"You two seem never satisfied with what you have" he observed once.

"It is not a virtue to be easily satisfied like a buffalo in the field" one of them retorted.

"It is a virtue" grandfather averred, "to be easily contented, to have but a few wants — there are the principles that have guided us all our lives. *Thanha* — clinging — is the root cause which makes us want this and that all the time, making us never satisfied."

"We will never progress then"

"It all depends what you mean by 'progress'" Mangalika said, looking wise. Her elder brothers laughed.

"Listen to the learned great grandmother talking! I suppose she thinks sinking in the mud of paddy fields is progress" they joked.

Father pointed to the road above the house. "That road was built twenty years ago. Before that road was built we had to take a very circuitous route to the nearest town. It used to take nearly three hours to get

to the hospital. Now it takes barely ten minutes by bus. That is what I call progress.”

“And is that progress too?” Grandfather pointed to a group of girls and boys walking across the paddy fields. The girls were wearing short frocks instead of the cloth and jacket and the boys, bell bottoms, instead of sarongs. “These young people today are so progressive that we don’t understand the language they speak any more.” Grandfather’s tongue-in-the-cheek remarks referred to the fact that the youngsters of the village used a liberal sprinkling of English words in their speech.¹⁸⁾

“They talk like that to show off their education.” Mangalika said.

“I don’t know about their education” grandfather spat out some red betel juice. “They seem a confused breed to me. Neither here nor there.”

The valley got rain from both monsoon seasons, making it possible for two rice crops to be harvested each year. Harvesting time was the busiest time for everyone, especially the women, for then they had to do not only their household chores but the reaping, carrying the stalks to the threshing floor and later, when the buffaloes had threshed it, the winnowing too. It was strenuous work in the hot burning sun and often they all had to tie a cloth round their head to protect it from the sun’s rays.

The sun had a cruel action on the skin. Mangalika’s elder sister, now married, had a beautiful skin when she was young. Everyone used to comment that she looked like a roseapple. Whether it was the effect of the sun or the evil eye and evil mouth¹⁹⁾ no one could tell but before she turned thirty her skin began to get lined and cracked. Perhaps child bearing too contributed to this. The really old people in the valley had the most amazing networks of intricate lines on their faces.

But though it was unbearably hot in the fields under the bare sky, the nights were very chilly. Sometimes, people got a fever which was said to be peculiar to the valley. They called it the ‘*Senni* fever’ which came on with

shivering fits.²⁰⁾ In a twinkling it made the body cold — so cold that nothing on earth could make it warm again. Those who got it were given pills in hospital which are referred to as ‘*Senni* pills’ but some died before they could even reach hospital.

Though Mangalika’s parents and grandparents all lived in one house, grandmother had insisted on having her own kitchen to herself. Old as she was, she preferred to do her own cooking.

“Let me do my own work till the day I die” she would say, “with the blessings of the noble triple gem and the gods.”

Grandmother kept her kitchen as meticulously clean as her ekel broom, which she washed each day after using and which she kept in a particular corner. Although she was bent double and walked with her arms flung way behind her, one glance at her features would tell anyone that she must have been a handsome woman in her day. She had an aquiline nose, high cheek bones and a copper coloured skin.

Very often, Mangalika would squat on grandmother’s kitchen floor of packed earth, swept clean, and help her cook. Sometimes, Mangalika would merely sit in front of the hearth, staring into the flames, or their dull reflection on the clay pots blackened and polished by wood smoke. Grandmother’s usual diet consisted of rice, a few dried sprats and chillies fried in oil, a curry of jak and a fresh salad of chopped greens mixed with coconut and onions.

“Aren’t you going to the celebrations across the river?” Mangalika asked her once.

Grandmother shook her head. “I don’t see why relatives across the river must send us messages like that” she said querulously. “If it is a wedding or a funeral it doesn’t matter, but a girl growing up...” she left the sentence hanging in mid air. She stirred a pot vigorously with a coconut shell ladle. “All my daughters and grand-daughters are grown up and all my

duties are done. After all, one cannot go empty handed to these functions” she added after a pause.

“But they will get offended if we don’t go.”

“I am not speaking for you young people. you all do what you want. As for me, my duties are done. The relatives I have on this side of the river are quite enough for me.”

Grandmother appeared to many to be hard, but Mangalika knew a warmer side to her. For instance, there was one sprightly old lady in the valley — a distant cousin of grandmother’s — of whom she was very fond. Where this old lady was concerned, grandmother was very gentle and even generous.

“Menikay is the one who helped me to deliver all my nine children” she would often recall. “And they were all born in this house. In our time no one went to hospital to have a baby. Now-a-days modern girls have no shame.”

“Weren’t you frightened when the babies came?” Mangalika asked.

Grandmother shook her head “Menikay was always at hand so I wasn’t scared. When the pains came, she would tie the ropes from the ceiling over the bed and I would hold on to them...”

“And then?”

“Then Menikay would do the rest.” Once I remember screaming and my mother-in-law looking at me and frowning. She said, “Have you no shame? There are males outside listening and the neighbours will laugh” But the moment her back was turned, Menikay whispered in my ear, “go ahead and scream all you want to, if it will ease you. Scream as loud as you can.” Grandmother chuckled softly as she recalled the incident.

“I do not think I would care to have a child, if it hurts all that much.” Mangalika said.

“Thu ! Thu !”²¹⁾ Grandmother made as if to spit. “Don’t say unlucky

things like that, child. Believe you me, bearing children for a woman is the most important thing in life. What is a field without a harvest or a tree without fruit? A barren woman is unlucky."

Mangalika thought of Menikay, the woman who helped other women to bring their babies into the world but never had had one of her own. "Unlucky" Grandmother had called her.

"All these old ideas are changing now" Mangalika said.

"Of course, everything changes." Grandmother grunted. "That is something everyone knows. Nothing is the same for long. Soon this house will be no more — this house where I brought nine children into the world."

"Not only the house, grandmother, the whole of our valley will be gone. Only the hills will remain and river. I wonder where we will go when the dam is built."

"Where will we go indeed!" Grandmother exclaimed and heaved a sigh. "Where ever we go, child, life is always full of change, full of strife. So where ever we go, let us go at least with a good heart."

The Festival Stall

From the time the drums of the *kāp* ceremony²²⁾ were heard rising from the town, Nandasiri seemed like a man possessed. With only one thought in his head — that of putting up his stall before the Kumbal and Randoli processions²³⁾ took to the streets — he rushed about in a frenzy of activity.

"Look at him!" his younger sister laughed teasingly, "No sooner the drums in the *devales*²⁴⁾ began than brother has got into a trance!"

"You all just look up and wait", Nandasiri growled, "I will do the earning as usual. Where do you think the money is going to come from to put up our stall?"

With the Esala Festival approaching, Nandasiri, a Municipal labourer, went about his duties with only half his mind on his work, waiting and watching for an opportunity to escape. His every thought, his every nerve, were all concentrated on this one objective of escaping, and scouring the town to scrounge money off any likely source, be it a casual acquaintance, good friend or proprietor of a grocery store.

"It's only till the *perahera*²⁵⁾ is over" he told the proprietor of one boutique which he was in the habit of frequenting. "I'll return the money after two weeks, I promise. I am not asking much — just a few kilos of flour and suger and some tea and dhal."

"Just a few kilos, huh?" the *mudalali*²⁶⁾ echoed dryly. "I'll give you five hundred grams of sugar and nothing more."

"*Aiyo!*"²⁷⁾ Nandasiri protested, "What are a few kilos of sugar and things for a man like you? Now with the *perahera* season on, business is booming, no?"

"Business is good it is true, but so are expenses and the cost of living" said the *mudalali*, working his cash register with a vengeance.

Nandasiri waited patiently and watched. He knew the *mudalali* was talking with the other side of his tongue; so he waited patiently.

"Hey boy!" the *mudalali* shouted to his young assistant presently. "Give 5 kilos of flour and suger over here soon and let's get rid of this nuisance." He gestured towards Nandasiri.

At another boutique the *mudalali* refused to part with any of his stocks but agreed to lend Nandasiri cash at twenty per cent interest for the two weeks. Nandasiri was so desperate that he accepted a loan of two hundred rupees at once.

His younger sister had saved up a little money in a clay till. She broke it up and counted out the notes and coins. There were close upon ten rupees in it. Nandasiri collected all that also.

"I'll give you back the money at the end of two weeks" he promised.

"You should have saved some money from your salary every month — instead of frittering it away" she reproached him.

"Saved up some money from my salary?" Nandasiri was hotly indignant. "It is you all who finish up my pay! I don't even get to buy a new shirt for myself, leave alone a wrist watch or a small transistor!"

"It's your fault. Every time mother or someone asks for money you are only too ready to give."

"It's because I'm living under the same roof with you all that I cannot better myself" he complained, "Why can't our elder brothers help a little? Why must I be the only one to support the whole family?"

"Because you are the only man with a head and a heart." Nandasiri's elder sister announced from the kitchen where she was grating coconuts.

"Looks like it is because of my head and my heart that I cannot progress." Nandasiri muttered. "One of these days I am going away — as far away as possible from all of you. Then the others will have to help."

"They won't" his elder sister said, "but don't let that bother you. We can manage" she flung aside an empty half of a coconut shell and began scraping another with an injured air.

Nandasiri glared through the doorway at his elder sister's bulging pregnant form. "If that drunkard no-good man of yours can't fend for you all, why in heaven's name do you bring a child into the world every year?" He asked her savagely.

"Some day things will turn out right for you" she proclaimed with a quiver of self-pity in her voice. "I am the unlucky one who will have to suffer all my life."

Nandasiri snorted. "When people go and do foolish things naturally they have to suffer."

"Its my *karma*".

"Looks like it is mine too" he shot back, stamping out of the house.

"So what are you telling me to do?" his sister shouted after him.
 "Drown these little ones in the lake and jump in it myself?"

He ignored her, inwardly fuming at how wilfully she had insisted on marrying that luckless devil of a never-do-well brother-in-law against all their advice. Now she, and they along with her, were reaping the inevitable results.

Every day Nandasiri went his round collecting a few more kilos of foodstuffs. With just two days more for the *Kumbal Perahera*, he had quite a store stacked away in the house.

"How much have you got now?" his younger sister asked him.

"About seven hundred rupees worth of stuff as well as cash. I ought to collect about another three hundred and then we are set for business."

"What shall we make this time to sell?"

"Hoppers, *vaddai*, ²⁸⁾ *dosi*... you know the usual things."

"I'll make the tea" his younger brother volunteered. "Put me in charge of that."

"Alright but tell elder sister to make some *dosi* and maybe mother can make some ²⁹⁾ *aluwa* if she has time. By the way, Sirisena Aiyah ³⁰⁾ at the Palace Bakery promised to give me ten pounds of bread on credit every day. We can cut a quarter loaf in half, spread a little jam or something in between and sell at one seventy five."

"How much profit will that give us?" His twelve year old younger brother set to working it out. "That's more than three rupees on each loaf!"

"A fine how-do-you-do that will be!" his younger sister exclaimed. "I only hope people won't stone us or beat us up for profiteering!"

"What are you saying! People get so hungry waiting to see the *perahera* that they will give anything to get a bite of something."

"And after the *perahera* is over?" his younger sister asked "What will

you do with the money you make?"

Nandasiri was silent for a moment. "I'll give you all something of course, don't worry" he hesitated.

"Let's buy a bicycle, *Aiyah...* please."

"I need a new dress", his younger sister observed "Now-a-days there are such pretty printed materials on the pavement, one get's crazy just looking at them."

"If I have some money saved up for the baby's milk food, that's all I want" his elder sister mumbled.

Nandasiri's mouth set in a grim line. "This time most of the money is for me" he announced firmly. "I intend to leave home."

He remembered how last time, after he had paid off every one else, he had been left with only enough money for a little booze. In fact, he had not been able to get back to work even on the third day after the binge. On the morning of the third day, his mother had woken him up and shouted at him to get up. He had started up and in his groggy state, had rushed out of the door and down the hill while struggling into his shirt. He had hardly run down a few yards than he had tripped on a stone and fallen, rolling headlong into an olive bush where he had remained entangled, half asleep, till his younger brother had found him much later in the day.

"So leave if you must, who's stopping you?" his younger sister's hurt, sharp tone cut through his thoughts, jerking him back to the present. Almost involuntarily he hardened himself against the tone. Unless he did that, he told himself, he would be blood-sucked all the rest of his life and never never allowed to have a future of his own. Here he was, hardly a man yet and bearing more responsibilities than two men put together! But even in those moments when his rebellious anger was at its height, making him resolve to leave home, he could feel a vague doubt stirring deep down inside of him. He wondered whether, when the time came for him to leave, he really

could turn his back on his family, especially his feeble old father, who was pushing on to eighty now.

On most days his father would lie on his mat, wheezing and coughing, but occasionally he would drag himself out into the sunlight and find an odd job to do, puttering about in some wealthy person's garden. The old man had an amazing gift for making things grow. Wearing a wide brimmed hat to shield him from the sun or rain, as the case may be, he would be seen crouching among the flower beds, weeding or throwing away snails. But each time Nandasiri saw him tottering down the road in search of work, he felt annoyed with his mother for letting the old man go or rather goading him to go.

One night when Nandasiri was out with friends, his elder sister's child had run up a high temperature and the old man had been sent out in the rain to get a packet of some powdered roots and herbs from an Ayurvedic medicine boutique. The whole of the following day the old man sat crouched on his mat, coughing and wheezing, his noisy chest heaving with short agonizing gasps. When Nandasiri heard what had brought it on, he was furious.

"Are you all trying to kill him — Sending him out in the rain like that?" he demanded from his elder sister and mother.

His mother glared back at him aggressively. "Sending him across the road is killing him?"

"Why couldn't someone else have gone out in the rain?"

"Look at him asking a question like that!" his mother retorted angrily. "We bring up children with the greatest difficulty and in our old age when they are not around to help us in an emergency even, it is our fault! Huh! *Appaday*³¹⁾! Look at him! Just because he gives us a little money every month he thinks he's Lord Sakra himself.³²⁾ Huh! coming to show off his gas! You better take your money and get out of here if you don't know how to talk!"

The effect of her tongue-lashing, ear-bashing tirade was to make Nandasiri recede inside of himself with guilt and embarrassment. Without another word, he picked up his father and helped him into a taxi and took him to hospital.

The day before the first Kumbal procession took to the streets, Nandasiri bought orange coloured polythene and collected a few rusty sheets of zinc from a work site. Hunting through the wooded hill sides round and about the town, he found a few bamboo trees and cut off some for staves. On the afternoon of the first festival procession, he took all this material with him as well as a table and there on the pavement in sight of the Temple of the Tooth, he planted his own *kap*. First, he tied the bamboo stave to the table legs firmly with coir rope and then fitted up the roof of zinc, with the polythene acting as a sun shade. But no sooner had he finished than a policeman barked at him to clear off the pavement.

"Every year we have had this stall here, *Ralahamy*³³⁾." Nandasiri entreated him. "Have a cup of tea. Would you care for a cigarette?"

"Be off with you ! I don't want your tea and cigarettes. You hear ? If you don't pull that thing down in five minutes you wait and see what will happen."

Nandasiri pretended to take down the stall but just as the policeman disappeared from view he set it up again. A minute later, another policeman arrived on the scene and the process was repeated. So it went on for the rest of the day till finally one angry policeman marched up to them and actually hauled Nandasiri down the road towards the police station.

"Why are you doing this to me, *Ralahamy* ?" Nandasiri pleaded "I am no thief! We only want to do a little business during the *perahera* season, and make a little extra money. What is wrong in that ? This is the only time of the year we can make a little extra money to go on a pilgrimage or something."

"Money ! Money ! Everybody wants to make money during the *perahera*" said the policeman acidly, "Have you got a permit?"

"No, *Ralahamy*."

"Then how can I allow you to be there?"

"Please, *Ralahamy*... have a little pity" and Nandasiri drew out twenty rupees from his shirt pocket and deftly passed it on to the cop.

"Alright then, I'll let you off this time but don't you let me catch you on the pavement tomorrow without a permit, you hear?"

"Yes, *Relahamy*."

Nandasiri bounded back to his stall. He was overjoyed to be released and his spirits soared as he put the final touches to the stall roof.

Soon the town began to fill up with crowds. Thirsty, hungry passers-by paused at their stall. Even a few scruffy looking tourists, hippies, no doubt, stopped to quench their thirst and taste some of the hot sizzling *vadais*.

Three Europeans, two men and a girl, walked up to where the stall was and began setting up their camera equipment by the side of it.

"Yes, I think this spot would be a good place for us to get some of our shots" one of them said. "We could get a head-on view from here. According to the route given, the *perahera* starts from the Temple of the Tooth and comes right up this way and then turns to the right, down this street."

"Isn't that super !" exclaimed the girl.

"Hey, Ellen" said the tall fair man who had spoken, "Did you get all the gen³⁴⁾ we need ? About the elephants and all? If not, you should be working on that now."

"Yes, I did, John. I've already got all the gen we need. Everything about the elephants, in fact. From where they come. How much their owners are paid for bringing them for the *perahera*. About their caparisons, who made them, how much they cost and so forth. How much would they

consume and what kind of wood."

"Good. And what about the rituals in the temples — I mean those ceremonies that are performed in the four temples before the *Perehera* proper begins?"

"Yeah. I've got all that too. Relax, John. I've been doing my homework before you two guys came up to Kandy. Been digging up material like nobody's business — all about the festival; even the history of the Holy Tooth Relic. I'm up to my gills in it!"

"Yeah, you do look a little toothy to me" said the burly man who was setting up the camera.

"Very funny".

"We'll go into a corner somewhere and have a look at that material sometime" said the man called John.

Later on in the evening, a gaunt, lanky hippie with long, sallow hair walked up to the stall.

"Get me kanza" he whispered to Nandasiri, "You know kanza?"

Nandasiri looked at him quizzically.

"Kan-za" the hippie repeated slowly and mimed smoking a cigarette.

"Cigarette?" Nandasiri asked brightly.

"No, no. Kan-za. Like Marijuana. You know?" He mimed smoking a cigarette again but this time managed to look dopey in addition.

"Arh!" Nandasiri slowly realized what it was that the hippie was after. "Ganja!" he exclaimed.

"Shshsh!" the hippie put his finger to his lips. "You get kanza for me quick. O. K. ? I wait here for you" he slipped a twenty rupee note into Nandasiri's palm, "quick!"

Nandasiri ran with the money down the road. He knew exactly where one could get ganja. Their neighbour in the slums where they lived was a small dealer in ganja. Nandasiri located him at a boutique. While the man

went out to get the ganja, Nandasiri waited impatiently. The radio in the boutique was blaring out at announcement about the *perahera* and Nandasiri with his elbows on the counter had no option but to listen.

“Be tuned into your sets tonight when we bring you a commentary on the Esala Perahera...” the announcer was saying, “From tonight the procession of the Esala Festival will traverse the streets of Kandy town every night for ten nights and once again thousands of people will witness the centuries old festival-one of the oldest festivals of the Sinhalese...”

Nandasiri wished the *Mudalali* would turn the set on to another station which had music. He loved music. Not that there had been a dearth of music in town that day. From morning they had heard nothing but loud music relayed through loud-speakers. Nandasiri's favourite song, which had been repeated over and over again, was one with wonderful echoing effects. It began with a man hollering out as though he were falling off a cliff and then there were these echoing effects followed by a mournful dirge. After a few bars of the dirge, the mood changed abruptly and with cymbals crashing, drums beating smartly and brash trumpets braying — every imaginable kind of western and eastern instrument assaulted one's ear drums with a jazzy catchy tune. Nandasiri's feet and hands automatically tapped and fidgeted and his head nodded vigorously whenever he heard the tune. He could imitate well the jerky body movements that accompanied that type of music. He had seen such dancing in western films and even in Hindi and Tamil ones.

Before long, the man appeared with the ganja wrapped in a piece of newspaper.

The thin unkempt face of the hippie broke into a wide grin when he saw Nandasiri running towards the stall with the package. He put another twenty rupee note into Nandasiri's palm. “Thanks, I may be back for more, O. K. ?”

"O. K." Nandasiri grinned happily.

More and more people stopped by their stall and it was all he could do to keep track of the accounting.

"The *vaddais* are finished now" his younger sister sang out. "I'm starting on the hoppers but I wish mother will come soon and take over. I'm dead tired. I wonder whether elder sister could have started her labour pains that mother hasn't turned up."

"Tomorrow we'll have to make double the quantity of *vaddais*" his younger brother said, "They went really fast"

"Make them without dhal tomorrow." Nandasiri advised, "that way we can make a hundred percent profit."

"What do you know about cooking?" His younger sister waved the iron frying spoon at him. "How to make *vaddais* without dhal?"

"Just fry some onions and chillies and mix them into a dough of flour and fry the blobs in oil."

"Chee!³⁵⁾ But that's cheating."

"Look, we are here to do business, you hear, in the shortest possible time. Remember we've got to cover up our costs and give back every cent to those from whom we've borrowed — with interest!"

"But why can't we make real *vaddais*?"

"Because it's too expensive. Fry them behind the table — then people will see only the smoke going over your head."

His younger sister scowled and turned to the business of making hoppers. She poured a little butter into the hot concave frying pan, lifted it by its handles with both hands and turned it around deftly. Then she kept it back on the fire, covered it with a lid and left it to bake.

"Do you know how much they were selling the seats at the *Maha Maluwa* this time?" Nandasiri asked.

"How much?"

“Five hundred ruppes each”

His younger brother gave a long low whistle. “Mother-of-mine-O !” he exclaimed.

“I’m going now to do my thing”, Nandasiri said, getting up from his stall seat and running out into the crowd with his tray of cigarettes, peppermint, chocolates and chewing gum. He did brisk business. He couldn’t afford to slacken because others were plying the same trade aggressively, galvanized into action even more than the *Ves* dancers seen in the *perahera* ³⁶⁾.

He was counting out the money behind the stall when the *perahera* began. He glanced up casually as the sound of drummers and *Ves* dancers drew close. The camera beside him began to shirr. The European girl was talking into a microphone.

“Today is the first night of the grand Esala Festival of the Sri Lankans, here in the picturesque town of Kandy by the lake,” she was saying, “the brilliantly lit Temple of the Tooth is reflected in the waters of the lake and the air is thick with the scent of jasmine and frangipanni and incense. The *perahera* has begun to move out from the Temple of the Tooth. The bells round the neck of the elephants jingle melodiously, making a pretty sound. The drums have begun their beat, laying a solid foundation, as it were, upon which the regal *Ves* dancers with their silver-spangled head-gear will place their earth-bound steps before twirling and making those high acrobatic leaps. Overhead, the sky with its thickly bedecked stars seem to vie with the lights of the *perahera* below...”

A long line of vehicles — buses, coaches, vans, lorries and cars — were parked right round the lake. They had brought hundreds of local visitors to the town. Some of them had cooked their meals beside the vehicles, using the water from the lake. They had made use of the lake for other purposes as well. A slight breeze came rippling over the water, bringing with it a sharp smell of human urine and spicy curries. The over-power-

ing odour clogged Nandasiri's nostrils, rousing him from his concentrated counting. The girl was still talking into the microphone.

"Its origin hidden in a mystique of ritual and symbolism, this unique world famous festival now parades its mysteries through the streets of Kandy town once again in a feast of ecstatic sound, colour and movement. And yet it is something more than just a feast for the senses, for in the majestic gait of lumbering elephants in colourful caparisons, in the dignified tread of the chieftains in all their oriental splendour, in the virile frenzy of silver spangled *Ves* dancers amidst throbbing drums, we see revealed before us from a storied past, the roots of a race; yes, the soul of an ancient people, their beliefs, myths of gods, legends of kings, of animistic cults having to do with rainmaking magic and of fertility rites..."

Nandasiri's sister was standing in front of the stall watching the *perahera*. Her face had an expression nearing that of ecstasy.

"The *perahera* is beautiful this year" she murmured.

Nandasiri looked up for a moment and then returned to his counting. "Five hundred and fifty-five hundred and seventy, five hundred and seventy five... wonder if there will be enough left this time for a pilgrimage..." he muttered as he counted.

NOTES

- 1) Refers to anglicized Sri Lankans aping the life style of their former British masters.
- 2) Here "Lord Haw Haw" derides stiff upper lipped British Sahibs.
- 3) Jane Austen's novel is a typical text for the study of English literature in upper middle class private schools in Sri Lanka.
- 4) In the 1970s the then socialist government's Land Reform Law allowed an individual to own no more than 50 acres of land. The government confiscated

thousands of acres of land and distributed land among villagers.

- 5) Traditional Indian dance form.
- 6) Ironically, Indian music sounds "alien" to anglicized upper middle class Sri Lankans whereas it would not to the ordinary person in the street.
- 7) Facial expressions and hand movements narrating a story.
- 8) A pair of drums.
- 9) Demon rituals are still performed in Sri Lanka by folk priests wearing elaborate costumes with masks, accompanied by drummers.
- 10) Among upper middle class Sri Lankans learning French or German is considered an accomplishment. The irony is that most older members of this class cannot speak their native language properly.
- 11) Alcoholic beverage made from juice of flower of coconut palm tree.
- 12) A round pancake made out of flour dough, grated kernel of coconut and water.
- 13) Arecanut — a kind of palm tree that grows very tall; it is much slimmer than the coconut palm tree. Jak — a fruit with a rough exterior that sometimes grows to huge proportions from the trunk of the tree.
- 14) Sinhala for younger brother.
- 15) Hero king of the Sinhalese, he reigned in the 2nd century A. D.
- 16) Sinhala for the older of younger brothers.
- 17) Battery-powered flashlights.
- 18) A knowledge of English is considered necessary for securing good employment, but some villagers who are not very well educated use English words unnecessarily when speaking Sinhala, an affectation to give the impression of being educated. Those well educated in the Sinhala schools do not use English words unnecessarily.
- 19) Sri Lankan villagers are still superstitious. When anybody or anything is admired, people fear the admired person or object will be harmed ; they suspect that envy is at the bottom of the admiration. If someone or something admired comes to harm, the cause is ascribed to "the evil eye" or "the evil mouth".
- 20) The fever referred to is probably a symptom of pneumonia.
- 21) Onomatopoeic, simulating the act of spitting; used to ward off bad luck.
- 22) The placing of a stake, a symbol of fertility, in each of four chief temples at the

commencement of the Esala Festival (July-August) honoring the Hindu god Indra.

23) Kumbal — a small procession held every night for five consecutive nights outside and around the temples. Randoli — After the five *kumbal* processions, randoli, the main procession, is held for five consecutive nights; the four main temple processions are joined by one from the Temple of the Tooth. The holy tooth relic of the Buddha is carried in a golden howdah strapped to an elephant's back.

24) Hindu temples.

25) Procession.

26) Businessman.

27) Expression of sorrow.

28) Vaddai — having the appearance of a thick biscuit, it is made of ground dhal, a lentil, mixed with spices and onions and fried in fat. Dosi — sweetmeat made out of ash pumpkin and suger.

29) Sweetmeat made from rice flour and sugar.

30) Literally, older brother.

31) Derisive, meaning "How do you like that?"

32) Chief in the pantheon of goods.

33) Constable.

34) Denotes all the facts.

35) Derisive, meaning "How disgraceful!"

36) Derived from the Kohomba Kankariya ritual for prosperity and fertility, the Ves dance is performed by elaborately costumed male dancers. Ves — silver head-dress.